

# Empowering the Parental Capacity of Female North Korean Defectors

Hong Seung-ah<sup>1</sup>  
Kim So-young<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This study aims at analyzing parental capacity of North Korean female defectors in South Korea and exploring measures to support and strengthen their parental capacity. Considering the double burden of North Korean female defectors for settling in a new society and performing the role of parents, this study begins defining the concept of parental capacity in three aspects; family life, social adaptation and parental obligations. Next, the study conducts survey and in-depth/focus group interviews targeting North Korean female/male defectors and their adolescent children. The analysis of their family life demonstrates that North Korean defectors place more value on their parent-child relationship rather than their husband-wife one and tend to be most content with their parent-child relationship compared to other aspects of life. It demonstrates the importance of their parent-child relationship and expectation towards their children. Second, the challenges North Korean female defectors face as parents vary depending on the age of children. Those with preschool children particularly concern finding a job to finance the cost of child-rearing. As their children grow older (elementary school and higher), however, female defectors find more difficult in supporting their children's education due to lack of reliable information and financial resources. As to their parental self-efficacy, North Korean female defectors view themselves positively in performing the basic parental role and maintaining a close relationship with their children, while showing low confidence in parenting and their lack of ability to guide children. It is largely to do with the lack of access to parenting information since their resource of information is limited to other North Korean defectors and the Internet. Third, the biggest challenge North Korean female defectors face is financial hardship, followed by parenting difficulties and language problems, which similarly plagues the most male defectors in

---

<sup>1</sup> Research Fellow, Korean Women's Development Institute

<sup>2</sup> Research Fellow, Korean Women's Development Institute

South Korea. In relation to work, female defectors found the biggest difficulty in balancing demands from their job and parenting, followed by low wages and long working hours in comparison to male defectors who answered long-working hours to be the biggest difficulty. Based on the results, following policy suggestions should be taken into consider. In order to sustain stable family life, family support programs should be incorporated as part of the education programs at Hana Center, while bolstering their parental roles in collaboration with relevant local institutions. Furthermore, parenting education programs tailored towards each age group of children should be offered to North Korean defector parents. Lastly, effective job training, particularly at Hana Center and continuous employment supports should be provided to North Korean defectors. Making more efforts to address social prejudice and discrimination against North Korean defectors is also crucial for them to settle in the society.

**Key words:** Female North Korean defectors, parental capacity, parent-child relationship, balance between work and family life, parenting education programs, job training

## Introduction

The number of North Korean defectors in South Korea has exceeded 20,000 persons, and two-thirds of them are women. In addition to an increase in the number of female defectors, one characteristic of the recent trend is that more people are entering South Korea as family units. Furthermore, a great number of North Koreans who settled in South Korea establish families in the new country. While remaining socially isolated, North Korean defectors face a wide range of difficulties, including prejudice, discrimination, and physical and psychological issues resulting from their escape from the North to the South through a third country.

While the South Korean government's support policies for North Korean defectors have generally focused on their stable settlement in South Korean society, it is time to turn greater attention to the family and gender issues that they face in daily lives. With about 75% of female defectors belonging to the 20 to 40 year-old age group, it can be assumed that a majority of them are involved in childbirth and childrearing. In this regard, it seems necessary to assign greater importance to family issues related to childcare and parenting.

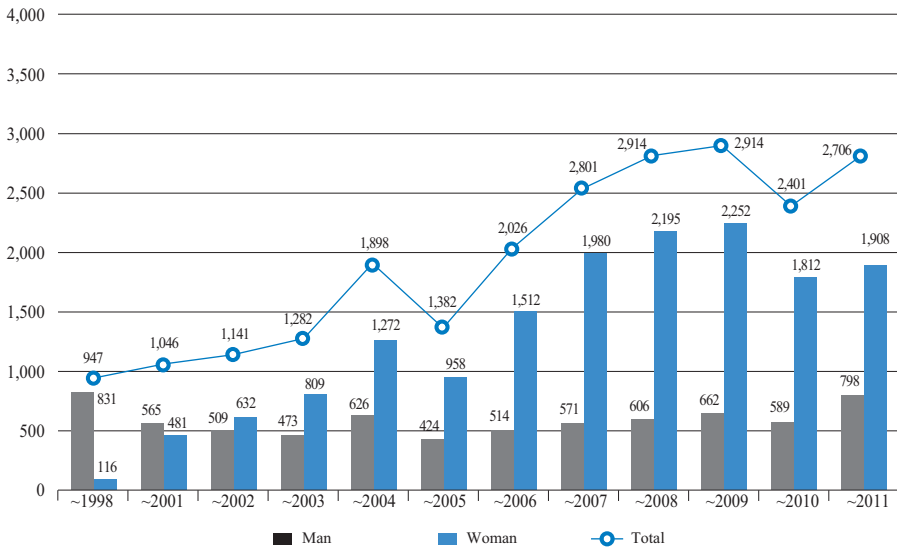
In this background, the goal of this research is to identify the needs of female North Korean defectors in order to enhance their adaptation and settlement in South Korea and to develop a policy agenda focusing on their childcare. In other words, this study attempts to seek comprehensive measures to improve female North Koreans' parental capacity and thereby facilitate their adaptation to South Korean society.

## Theoretical Discussion

### *Trends in North Korean defectors entering South Korea*

First, the annual number of North Korean defectors seeking refuge in South Korea began to rise in the 1990s and exceeded 1,000 persons in the early 2000s. This figure has continued to grow ever since, standing at 2,026 in 2006 and 2,706 in 2011. As of May in 2012, the total number of North Korean refugees in South Korea exceeded 23,000.

Second, while male defectors had been prevalent prior to 2001, the proportion of female defectors eventually outgrew that of men, amounting to 55% in 2002, 75% in 2006, 78% in 2008, and 70% in 2011. One interpretation for this trend is that during the aggravated food crisis in North Korea that began in the mid-1990s, a number of North Korean women who crossed the border voluntarily or were trafficked into China learned about life in South Korea and how to get there. They saved money in China and then came to South Korea (Kang Hyeon-suk, 2009).



Note: Numbers are based on those granted defector status  
 (Ministry of Unification website: <http://www.unikorea.go.kr/>)

Figure 1. North Korean defectors entering South Korea by gender

Third, greater numbers of North Koreans are defecting as family units. In 1996, the number of North Koreans who came to South Korea as families reached 27 persons from nine families, amounting to 48% of all North Koreans entering South Korea that year. The number has since increased dramatically, marking 91 persons from 36 families in 1999, 131 persons from 50 families in 2000, and 446 persons from 164 families in 2002. In numerous recent cases, families that settled in South Korea have helped other family members in North Korea or a third country come and join them in the South (Kim Yeong-su, 2000; Kang Hyeon-suk, 2009).

Fourth, compared to the years before 1994, when the defectors in their 20s and 30s prevailed, the increase in the number of “family defectors” has resulted in more children under ten years old, teenagers, and seniors in their 60s or older. Another characteristic of this recent trend is the large proportion of those in their 20s and 30s: 26.8% and 34.1% in 2005 and 26.8% and 23.7%, respectively, as of August 2011. Because those in their 20s and 30s commonly participate in the active labor force while caring for their children at the same time, policy support for both their employment and childcare must be sought from various perspectives.

Table 1. Female North Korean defectors by age

(unit: persons)

Age	0-9	10-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 or older	Total
Number	787	2,358	5,582	6,535	3,182	983	931	20,358
Percentage	4	12	27	32	15	5	5	100

Source: Quoted from the North Korean Defectors Foundation (2011), Ministry of Unification (2011)

**Definition of the parental capacity of female North Korean defectors**

In addition to defining parental capacity in general, this research will attempt to redefine the concept of parental capacity based on the characteristics of female North Korean defectors, who face the challenge of settling in a new environment while managing parenting. In this research, the parental capacity of female North Korean defectors is defined as their capacity as a parent, consisting of three aspects: family life, parenting, and social adaptation. In other words, we will approach the concept in terms of the women’s individual capacity and their family and socio-economic conditions as well, including their capacity to adapt to South Korean society, family structure and relations surrounding childrearing, and additional elements required for parenting.

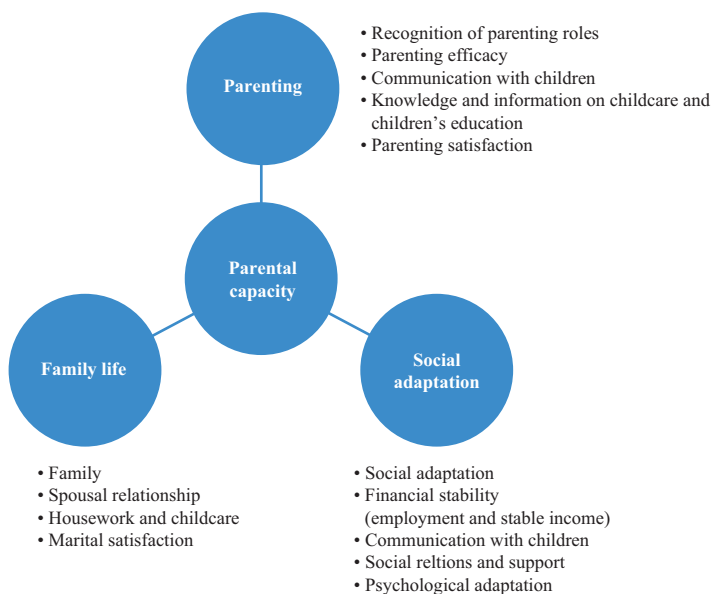


Figure 2. Categories and structural elements of the parental capacity of female North Korean defectors

## Family Life, Parenting Roles, and Social Adaptation of North Korean Defectors

### Overview

In this research, we surveyed a total of 303 female North Korean defectors. In order to examine the dynamics of family environment and structure surrounding the women, we also surveyed 150 male North Korean defectors and 100 North Korean teenagers, as these groups could have significant impact on the women's parental capacity.

### Survey Results

#### *Family life*

In terms of economic status, both female and male groups of North Korean defectors were very poor. Half the women (50.2%) had no personal income, and even if they did, the majority (92.7%) earned less than 1.5 million won (USD 1,500, assuming USD 1=1,000

won) per month. Monthly income levels were very low for men as well, with 90% of them earning less than two million won and of this 14.3% having no income at all. Because of such poverty, they were struggling to afford care and education for their children. According to the findings of this survey, compared to men, women placed greater importance on their relationship with their children than on their spousal relationship. Their level of satisfaction was highest with their parent-child relationship (7.48 of 10 points) and lowest with their health (5.61 points out of 10), implying that health issues can present an obstacle to their adaptation to society and childcare.

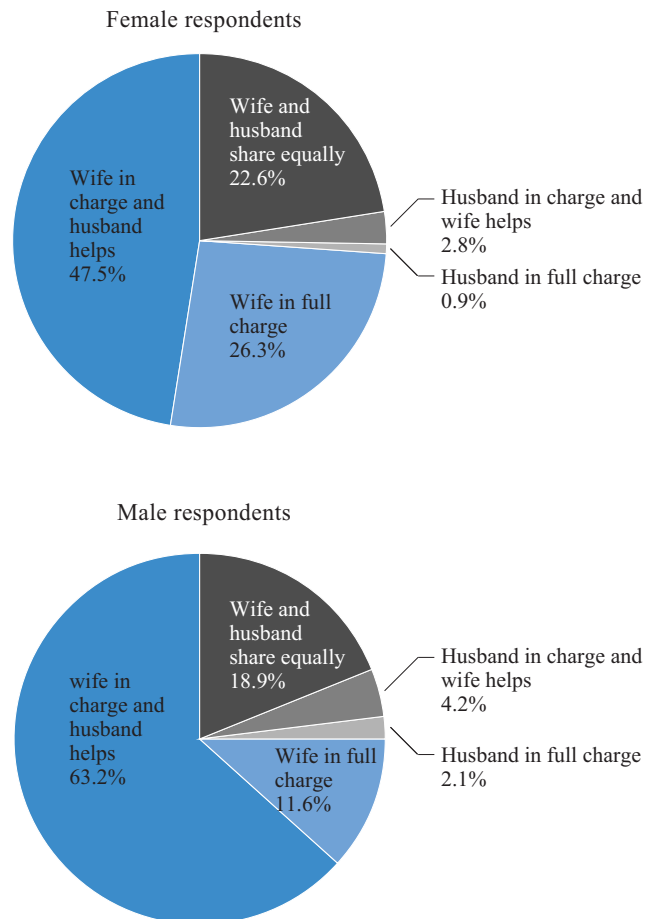


Figure 3. Division of childcare among North Korean defector parents

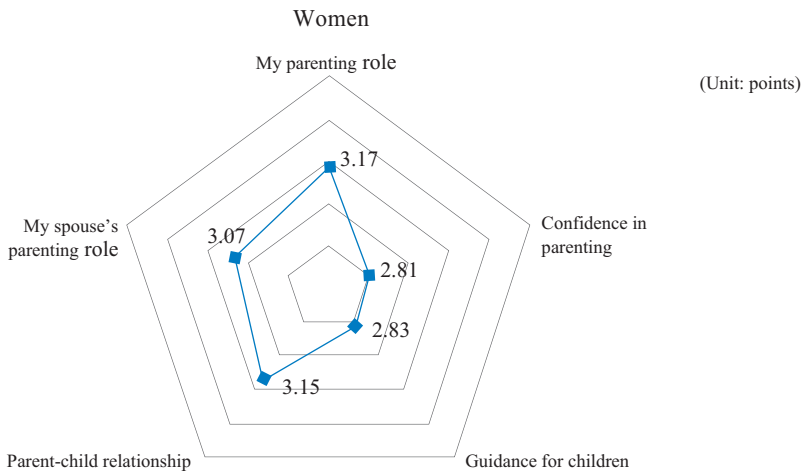
*Parenting roles*

Regarding their parenting roles, 91% of female respondents with elementary school children confessed difficulties in helping their children with schoolwork. For those with teenage children, their concerns included “the child’s school life” (23.9%), “the child’s employment and career” (22.7%), and “the financial situation of the family” (17.0%). Male respondents chose “the financial situation of the family” (31.8%) as their greatest concern. This result suggests that women with elementary school-age children need access to information on education and the knowledge and skills required to help their children with schoolwork. Women with teenage children need information on their children’s school lives and careers.

Regarding gender division of childcare, among the 217 women living with their husbands, the response “I’m the main caregiver and my husband helps” was highest at 47.5%, followed by “My husband and I share equally” with 22.6%. This shows that the gender division of roles is more balanced in childrearing than in housework.

Among the 95 male respondents residing with a spouse, 63.2% marked “My wife is the main caregiver and I help,” followed by 18.9% “We share equally,” 11.6% “My wife is totally in charge,” 4.2% “I am the main caregiver and my wife helps,” and 2.1% “I’m totally in charge.” All in all, women played a significantly greater role in childcare.

As to parenting efficacy, which refers to the level of satisfaction with the parenting role, women were relatively satisfied with their parenting role (3.17 points out of 4), parent-child relationship (3.15 points out of 4), and their spouse’s parenting role (3.07 points out of 4) but expressed lower confidence in parenting role (2.81 points out of 4) and in guidance for the child (2.83 points out of 4). This indicates that female North Korean defectors tend to feel a high degree of satisfaction with being a parent and with their relationship with their children, but believe that they lack knowledge of parenting roles, guidance for children, and problem-solving skills.



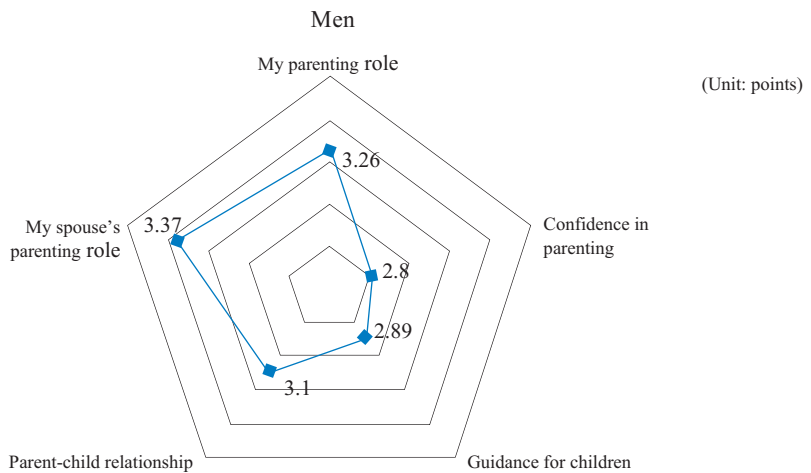


Figure 4. Comparison of parenting efficacy between female and male North Korean defectors

When parenting efficacy was viewed by length of stay in South Korea (Figure 5), it decreased in all five areas as the length of stay increased. This can be interpreted that as their length of stay increases, their children grow older and parents begin to perceive a lack of skills and information on childrearing and their children’s education. This finding necessitates the continuous provision of education and consultation on parenting from the early stage of their entry to South Korea.

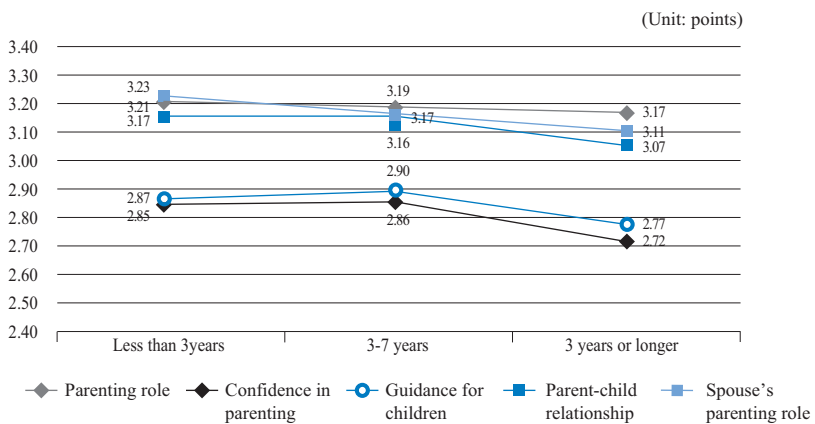
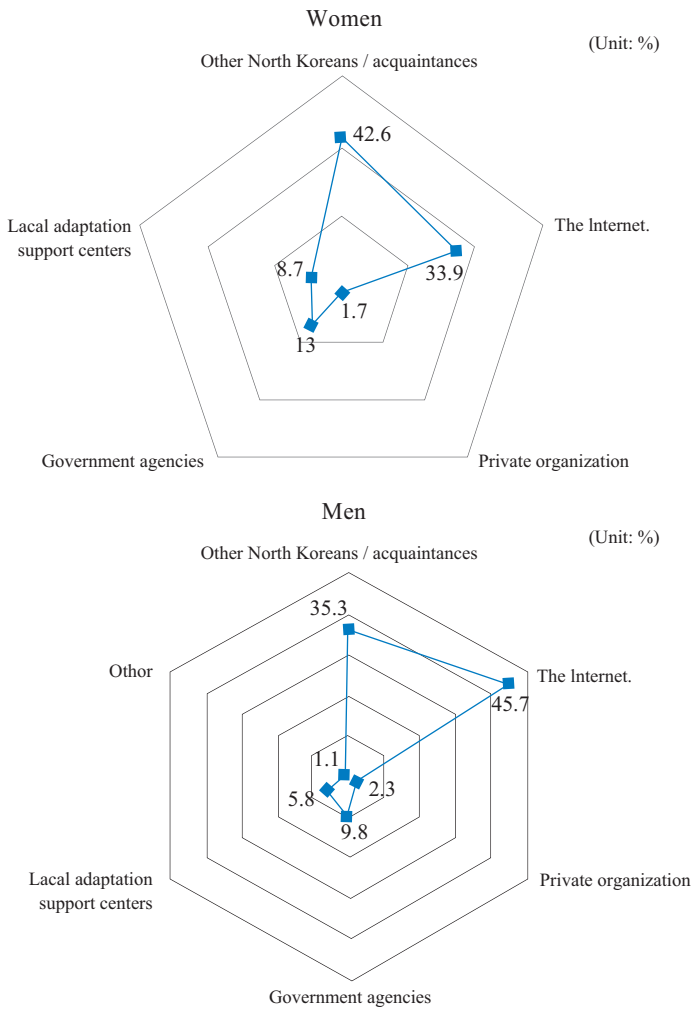


Figure 5. Parenting efficacy of North Korean defectors by length of stay



A large proportion of female respondents (42.6%) obtained information on childrearing from other North Koreans and/or acquaintances. Additional information sources included the Internet (33.9%), government agencies (13.0%). In the case of men, the Internet was the most popular source of information (45.7%), followed by other North Koreans and/or acquaintances (35.3%). However, not many made use of government agencies (9.8 %) or local adaptation support centers (5.8%). These results imply a need to expand the support policies and programs related to childrearing at local adaptation support centers catering to the needs of North Korean defector parents.



Note: multiple responses

Figure 6. Sources of information on childrearing

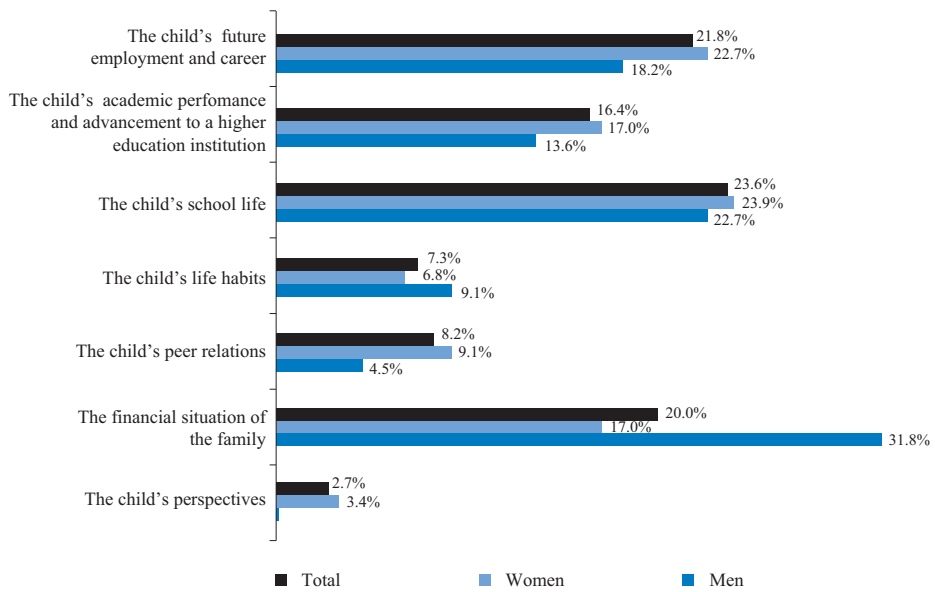


Figure 7. Challenges facing North Korean defector parents in relation to the rearing of teenage children

The greatest challenge facing female North Korean defectors with teenage children was “the child’s school life” with 23.9%, followed by “the child’s job and career” with 22.7%, “the child’s academic performance and advancement to a higher educational institution” with 17.0%, and “the financial situation of the family” with 17.0%. Their male counterparts selected “the financial situation of the family” (31.8%) as their greatest difficulty, followed by “the child’s school life” (22.7%) and “the child’s future employment and career” (18.2%).

*Social adaptation*

Approximately half of the female North Korean defectors surveyed held jobs, but their job quality turned out to be lowest: 80.2% worked as a temporary employee or daily laborer and 47.0% worked for more than eight hours per day. Working mothers with preschool-age children and/or elementary school-age children found balancing work and childcare to be their greatest challenge (28.5%).

Difficulties that working female North Korean defectors experienced included “balancing work and childcare” (28.5%), “low wages” (25.2%), and “long working hours” (20.5%). Meanwhile, working male North Korean defectors identified “long working hours” (24.4%) as the greatest challenge. In conclusion, the greatest challenges were balancing work and childcare for women and long working hours for men.

(Unit: points)

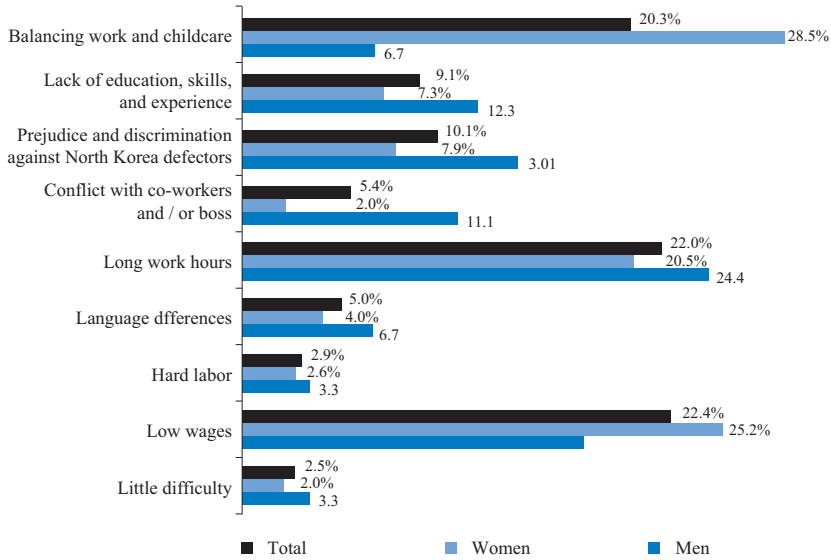


Figure 8. Challenges facing work: North Korean defectors

If these difficulties were examined according to child’s age, women with preschool and elementary school-age children reported balancing work and childcare to be their greatest difficulty, with 46.9% and 32.3%, respectively. Those with teenage children, with less childcare burden overall, selected long working hours (27.1%). This demonstrates that both support for work-life balance and quality jobs with higher wages and shorter work hours are needed to make female North Korean defectors’ participation in the labor market more sustainable.

The responses among men showed little variation with changes in child’s age: those with preschool-age children pointed to prejudice and discrimination against North Korean defectors (24.2%) and long working hours (24.2%); those with elementary school-age children to long working hours (27.5%) and lack of education, skills, and experience (15.0%); and those with teenage children to conflict with co-workers and/or boss (23.5%). This result can be attributed to men’s lesser involvement in childcare than women’s.

Table 2. Difficulties facing work: North Korean defector mothers

(Unit: persons (%))

	Preschool-age children	Elementary school-age children	Teenage children
Balancing work and childcare	15 (46.9)	20 (32.3)	8 (14.0)
Lack of education, skills, and experience	0 (0.0)	4 (6.5)	7 (12.3)
Prejudice and discrimination against North Korean defectors	0 (0.0)	6 (9.7)	1 (1.6)
Conflict with co-workers and boss	0 (0.0)	1 (1.6)	2 (3.5)
Long working hours	4 (12.5)	11 (17.7)	16 (27.1)
Language differences	0 (0.0)	4 (6.5)	2 (3.5)
Hard labor	1 (3.1)	1 (1.6)	2 (3.5)
Low wages	12 (37.5)	14 (22.6)	1 (1.6)
Little difficulty	0 (0.0)	1 (1.6)	2 (3.5)
Total	32 (100.0)	62 (100.0)	57 (100.0)

Table 3. Difficulties facing work: North Korean defector fathers

(Unit: persons (%))

	Preschool-age children	Elementary school-age children	Teenage children
Balancing work and childcare	1 (3.0)	1 (2.5)	4 (23.4)
Lack of education, skills, and experience	5 (15.2)	6 (15.0)	2 (5.0)
Prejudice and discrimination against North Korean defectors	8 (24.2)	2 (5.0)	3 (17.6)
Conflict with co-workers and boss	2 (6.1)	4 (10.0)	4 (23.5)
Long working hours	8 (24.2)	11 (27.5)	3 (17.6)
Language differences	3 (9.1)	2 (5.0)	1 (5.9)
Hard labor	0 (0.0)	3 (7.5)	0 (0.0)
Low wages	5 (15.2)	10 (25.0)	1 (5.9)
Little difficulty	1 (3.0)	1 (2.5)	1 (5.9)
Total	33 (100.0)	40 (100.0)	17 (100.0)

Among the difficulties they experienced in adapting to South Korean society, ten items were investigated. “Financial difficulties” received 3.50 points out of 4 from women, followed by “difficulties in childrearing and child education” with 3.26 points out of 4.

The participation rate of female North Korean defectors in social gatherings (family gatherings, parent meetings at school, local community activities, etc.), excluding gatherings among North Korean friends and gatherings hosted by organizations related to North Korean defectors, was very low; this indicates that their social networks were limited to the North Korean defector community. About 80% of female respondents participated in gatherings among North Korean friends and ones hosted by organizations related to North Korean defectors. The level of satisfaction was greatest with gatherings among North Korean friends and gatherings hosted by organizations related to North Korean defectors, averaging 3.24 points on a 4-point scale. Satisfaction with parent meetings at school was lowest, with 2.97 points assigned.

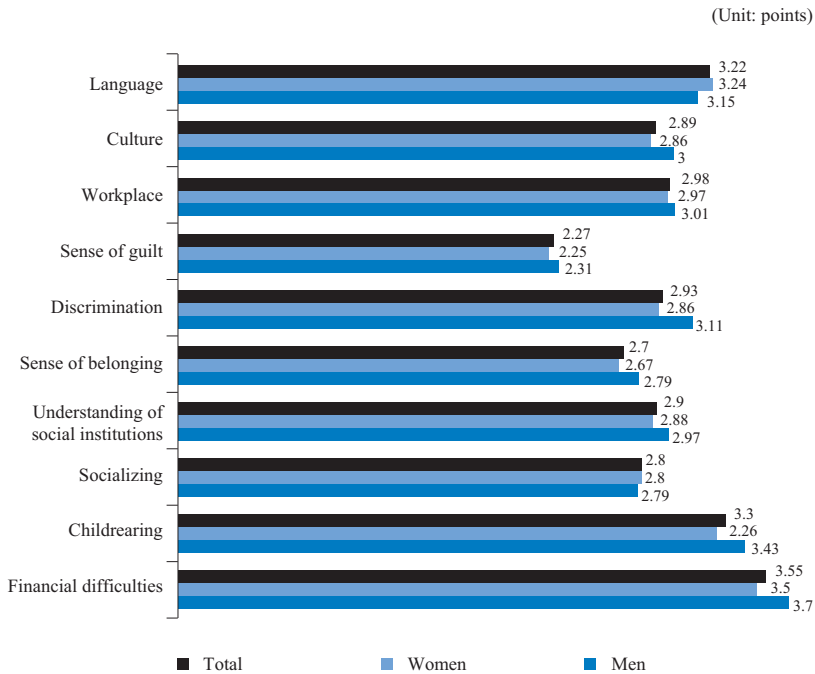


Figure 9. Difficulties experienced in adapting to South Korean society

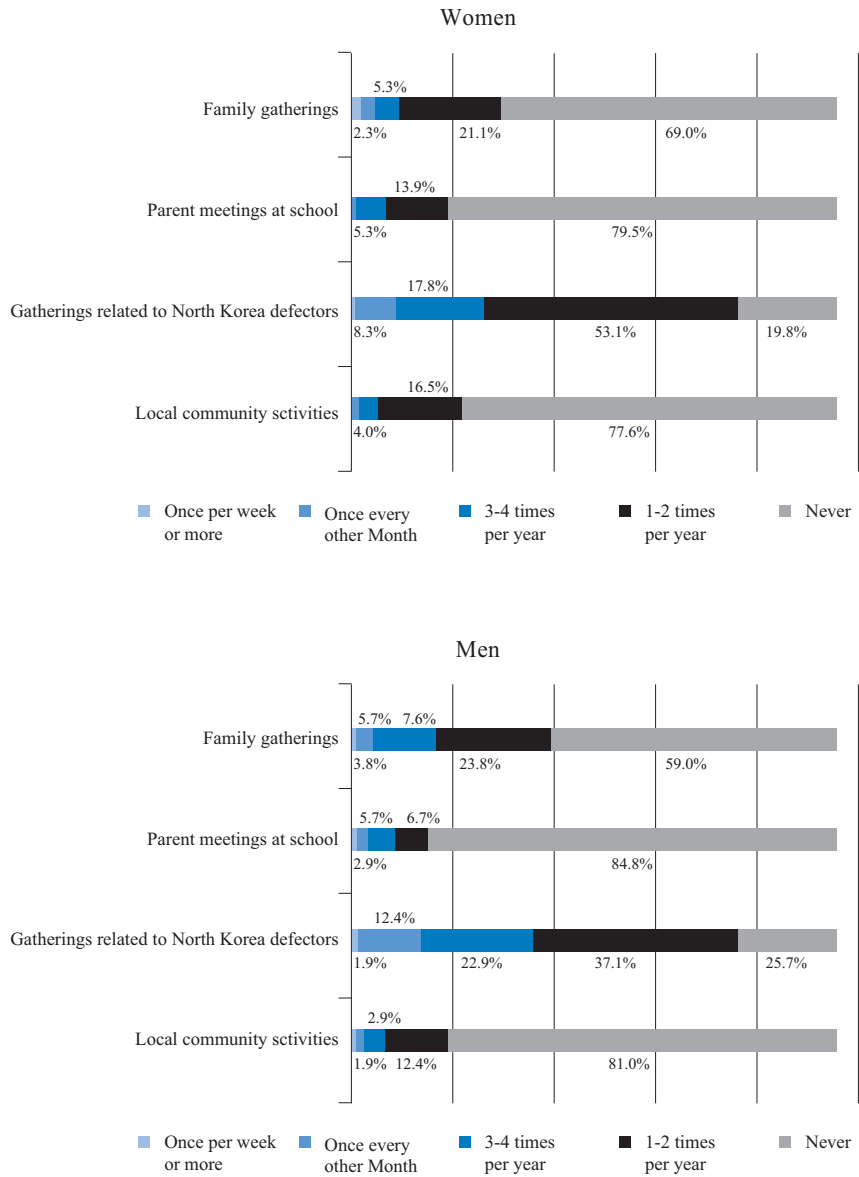


Figure 10. Participation in social gatherings in the past one year

## Conclusions and Policy Suggestions

Based on the findings of this research, we suggest policy directions to enhance North Korean defectors’ parental capacity.

First, gender perspectives focusing on women and families should be central when considering establishment of support policies for North Korean defectors. As more North Koreans have been arriving in South Korea as family units, it is critical to understand the changes they undergo in their family structures and relations while struggling to adapt to South Korean social systems and culture. Measures should also be taken to allow them to settle in a new society based on a stable family environment. In this regard, introducing support policies for North Korean refugee families and gender-based policy interventions will have ever more important implications.

Second, support policies for North Korean defectors should be established as a component of social integration policy. According to the survey, North Koreans in South Korea feel highly isolated and their social relations remain restricted to their own community only. This indicates that they failed to be integrated into the wider South Korean society. In order to help them settle and function as legitimate members of society, it appears necessary to devise support policies aimed at social integration rather than simply offering them with employment support and financial assistance.

Third, a fundamental shift is required of support policies for North Korean defectors. Given the division of the Korean Peninsula for more than six decades, the two Koreas have evolved from different perspectives and cultures. From the perspective of social integration, stable settlement of North Korean defectors will promote their socio-cultural adaptation and stable family lives, and it will serve as a cornerstone for cultivating the future generations following the unification. In this regard, policies for North Korean defectors need to be implemented under a future-oriented long-term plan.

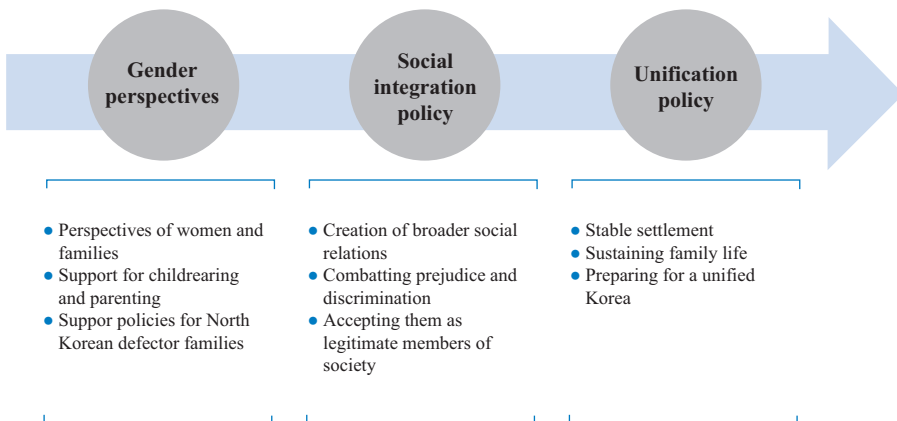


Figure 11. Policy directions for support policies for North Korean defectors

## References

### [Korean Language]

- Kang Hyeon-suk (2009). "Research on Female North Korean Defectors' Experiences of Raising Elementary School Children," *Journal of Korean Education* 36.
- Office of Education Welfare at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2012). *2012 Statistics of North Korean Defector Students*.
- Korean Law Information Center (2010). *The Act on the Protection of and Settlement Support for North Korean Defectors*.
- The National Human Rights Commission of Korea (2009). *A Survey of Violations of the Human Rights of Female North Korean Defectors during Their Process of Escape from North Korea and Settlement in South Korean Society*.
- Kim Yeong-su (2000). "Family Issues among North Korean Defectors," a Presentation Paper at the Korea Social Science Institute.
- Kim Seok-hyang, Kim Mi-ju, and Choi Yeong-sil (2009). *Research on the Status of Female North Korean Defectors and Measures to Support Their Settlement*, The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.
- Park Yeong-ja (2008). "Comparison of Perceptions of Work Life between North Korean Defectors and Immigrants with a Focus on the Establishment of Ideology and Directions for Social Integration Policy, Institute for National Security Strategy," *Policy Research* 159.
- Park Jeong-lan (2009). "Childcare and Work of Female North Korean Defectors," *Korean Culture Research* 28:97-135.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2012). "Support for Sound Family Relations among North Korean Defectors," a Presentation Paper at the Academic Conference Co-hosted by the Academy on North Korean Defectors and the North Korean Refugees Foundation.
- North Korean Refugees Foundation (2011). *2011 Report on the Survey of the Lives of North Korean Defectors*.
- Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (2008). *2008 Report on the Economic Activities of North Korean Defectors: Employment, Unemployment, and Income*.
- Jin Mi-jeong and Lee Sun-hyeong (2007). "Socio-cultural Adaptation of North Korean Defectors by Family Characteristic," *The International Journal of Human Ecology (formerly, the Journal of the Korean Home Economics Association)* 455).
- The Ministry of Unification (2012). *2012 Handbook on Settlement Support for North Korean Defectors*.
- Korea Institute for National Unification (2005). *2005 White Paper on the Unification of Germany*.



*[English Language]*

- Johnston, G.W., and Mash, E. J. (1989). "A Measure of Parenting Satisfaction and Efficacy." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 18:167-175.
- Olson, David H and Barnes, H. L. (1985). "Parent-Adolescent Communication and the Circumplex Model," *Family Process* 56.
- Parsons, R. J. (1991). "Empowerment: Practice Principles in Social Work," *Social Work with Groups* 14(2):7-21.
- Rebecca, D. (2009). "The Relationship between Parental Sense of Competence and Parental Descriptions of Behavior and Treatment." Doctoral Dissertation. Marshall University. Huntington, West Virginia, USA.